

Iowa Outdoors

Iowa Department of Natural Resources
www.iowadnr.gov

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June 24, 2008

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IOWA TRAILS RECEIVE NATIONAL RECOGNITION

The trails at Mines of Spain are some of the best in Iowa's state parks and by being designated as part of the National Trails System by the U.S. Department of Interior on June 4; the trails are now in elite company.

Iowa had 16 trails or portions of trails designated as National Trails System, and with the designation of Mines of Spain, along with the Great Western Trail and Summerset Trail, the number is pushed to 19.

"I felt we were worthy of it. I get a lot of complements from people who use it," said Wayne Buchholtz, park ranger for Mines of Spain, since 1993. "I like to say we have some of the best trails around and this designation just proves it."

Receiving the designation was a six month process. Part of the application looks at the types of trails and facilities available to users. Mines of Spain State Recreation Area has different trail types, including cross country skiing, and has trails that showcase different natural settings, for example, different forest settings, upland and lowland settings, and even floating trails.

The application also asks if the area has any historically significant areas and many – not all – usually have as many as three significant areas. "We have 252 archeological sites in the park covering diverse cultures," Buchholtz said.

Visitors to the Mines of Spain trails will see dramatically different scenery as the seasons change. When the trees are leafed out, all that is visible from the trails are the

trees. Once the leaves are gone, trail users discover cliffs and rock outcroppings and a hidden stream. Right now, the prairie trail is blooming and full of color.

Some of the nearly 20 miles of trails have interpretive signs at the significant or historical features. Buchholtz said the trails have added GPS coordinates including mileage and will soon have elevations.

Once the park staff has finished with flood related clean-up, they will look at a ceremony announcing this new designation. Mines of Spain is already designated a National Historic Landmark and a Silos & Smokestacks National Heritage Site.

“We hope this new designation will encourage more people to come visit the area because we have something really special right here in Iowa,” he said.

The Summerset trail goes through Summerset State Park and like other trails that are near a state park, the park serves as a hub for trail users. Mark Edwards, state trails coordinator for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources since 1980, said he is seeing more activity on Iowa trails than in the past.

“I’m meeting more and more people in our state parks who are riding these trails in groups, leapfrogging from park to park as they work their way down these different trail systems,” Edwards said. “Our parks are serving as a hub for these trails. They use our facilities, stay in our parks and get local information from the staff as they use these trails.”

Many communities see trails as a way to connect with each other and as a way to bring in some tourism to their area.

“People have really tuned in to these trails and it is good to see not only for the health benefits, but it is good to see people connecting with these rural communities and supporting the mom-and-pop businesses,” Edwards said.

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HUNTERS BAGGED 630,000 ROOSTERS IN IOWA

DES MOINES - More than 109,000 pheasant hunters harvested 630,000 roosters in 2007, keeping Iowa among the national leaders in pheasant hunting. The harvest

estimates are based on a survey of small game hunters. The 2007 pheasant harvest was a 16 percent decline from 2006, when hunters harvested nearly 750,000 roosters.

But as Iowa continues to lose critical Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) habitat, it will not likely provide pheasant hunting and harvests that was experienced in the 1980s and 1990s, with more than 200,000 hunters and harvests topping 1 million roosters.

Pheasants lost critical habitat necessary to survive poor weather when the equivalent of 233 square miles of land enrolled in CRP were plowed under last fall when the contracts expired. Add in another 209 square miles of CRP that will expire this fall and will likely be plowed under and the total CRP loss is about equal to the size of Mills County, or a strip of grasslands one and a half miles wide running from Davenport to Omaha.

Ten years ago, Iowa had twice the number of hunters, and roughly twice the pheasant harvest than today. Of the 109,000 hunters, more than 23,000 were non-residents. Those hunters came 42 different states, but primarily from Minnesota, Wisconsin, Missouri, Michigan and Illinois. Iowa's peak for non-residents was in 1997 with more than 50,000. That is a lot of money not being spent in cafes, hotels and gas stations in rural parts of Iowa. The 2006 economic impact of upland bird hunting in Iowa was almost \$250 million.

Residents hunted an average of seven days and bagged six birds during the season. Nonresidents hunted an average of five days and bagged six birds as well. Hunter success was highest in the first nine days, when about 63 percent of the total pheasant harvest took place. Resident hunters accounted for 79 percent of the total pheasant harvest.

An estimated 3,800 adults took 7,100 youths hunting during Iowa's special two-day youth pheasant season. The youth hunters harvested an estimated 5,800 roosters.

Other small game harvest estimates were also lower. Some 18,200 quail hunters harvested more than 54,400 quail, down from 22,500 hunters and 75,300 harvested in 2006. Iowa's 31,100 rabbit hunters harvested 131,250 cottontail rabbits last fall, down from 34,300 hunters and 155,900 harvested in 2006.

"Our small game populations can bounce back from these short-term, weather related set backs like we experienced this year, but we need to have good habitat," said Todd Bogenschutz, upland wildlife biologist with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. "Without the habitat, they have no place to get out of the weather, hide from predators or to hatch and raise their young. Road ditches, waterways, and fence lines produce very few pheasants or quail, it is really that simple."

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PHEASANTS ENDURE BRUTAL WINTER, COLD WET SPRING

BOONE - Iowa's hard winter and cool, wet spring made life here difficult for pheasants. Take away places to hide from the weather or predators, and to hatch young, and life gets even more challenging.

"There is no question that weather conditions this past winter and spring was bad for pheasants," said Todd Bogenschutz, upland wildlife biologist for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources.

"Pheasants are resilient to weather, but populations may not recover from the loss of habitat. These birds will move to fence lines and road ditches, but predation is much higher in these small habitats," Bogenschutz said. "They have fewer places to run and no place to hide."

Pheasants lost critical habitat necessary to survive poor weather when the equivalent of 233 square miles of land enrolled in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) were plowed under last fall when their contracts expired. Add in another 209 square miles of CRP that will expire this fall and will likely be plowed under and the total CRP loss is about equal to the size of Mills County, or a strip of grasslands one and a half miles wide running from Davenport to Omaha.

"In areas with good habitat, we will have good pheasant hunting. With our current outlook, there will likely be less competition out there this fall and hunters willing to hunt past the first week will likely have the field to themselves," he said. "This year would be a good year to introduce someone to pheasant hunting, or to bring a young son or daughter along. It is an opportunity to spend quality time together and to pass along our hunting heritage to the next generation."

Bogenschutz uses a weather model based on 40 years of weather data and the August Roadside Survey to predict nesting success and the model is correct 80 percent of the time. The winter was the 10th snowiest in 121 years of snowfall data, and the spring was the 12th wettest and 31st coldest in 136 years of spring data.

"Based on these weather data, our model predicts Iowa's statewide pheasant population will likely be significantly lower in 2008," he said. "In the northwest regions where snowfall and rainfall were lower, populations may fair a little better and offer good hunting opportunities, depending upon remaining summer weather conditions."

In other regions, Bogenschutz expects counts could decline 50 percent or more compared to 2007 estimates. Habitat will be the key to finding birds and it is getting more difficult to find with the record crop prices, he said. With flooding this spring and high crop prices some are asking that CRP lands be released without penalty so they can

be farmed again. Farming these marginal lands again would greatly increase soil erosion and lower water quality and have a devastating impact on grassland wildlife like pheasants, he said.

Upland game hunting had a \$220 million dollar impact on Iowa's economy in 2006. A significant loss of CRP would seriously hurt the rural retailers in Iowa that depend upon hunter revenues. "If you have an opinion on the release of CRP, I would not hesitate to share that opinion with Iowa's congressional delegation," said Bogenschutz.

Turning the Habitat Tide

Iowa is currently accepting land in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's CRP State Acres for wildlife Enhancement (SAFE) program, but only 27,700 acres were designated for Iowa. The land must be in a SAFE project area and meet basic CRP eligibility requirements. Producers entering the program will receive annual CRP rental payments, incentives and cost-share assistance to establish habitat-enhancing natural covers on eligible land. Visit the DNR's private lands webpage for more information <http://www.iowadnr.com/wildlife/privatelands/index.html>

The USDA Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) specializes in creating habitat on land without any cropping history and the program provides about 60 percent cost share for approved practices. Eligible practices include brush management, native grass seeding, edge feathering, forest stand improvement, tree and shrub establishment, prescribed burning and more.

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COST SHARE MONEY AVAILABLE FOR IMPROVING WILDLIFE HABITAT

DES MOINES – The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) helps landowners enhance, protect, and develop wildlife habitat on their property and has been allocated a large amount of funds to spend in Iowa.

"WHIP is a great program to help landowners improve habitat on their properties," said Matt Dollison, private lands wildlife biologist with the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR). "It provides about 60 percent cost share for approved practices. Landowners can actually get paid to improve the habitat themselves or can hire a contractor to do the work."

This is a federal program that specializes in creating habitat on land without any cropping history. Eligible WHIP practices include brush management, native grass seeding, edge feathering, forest stand improvement, tree and shrub establishment, prescribed burning, and much more.

Applying for WHIP is easy, he said. First, work with your local wildlife specialist to plan the habitat practices that are right for you and the wildlife you wish to attract, Dollison said. Next fill out an application. The specialist will make sure the application is ranked and will contact you if the application is funded.

“We have a limited amount of time to allocate money to projects. This means the sooner you apply, the better chance you have that your application will be funded so don’t delay,” said Dollison.

Contact an Iowa Department of Natural Resources biologist to find out about WHIP or other wildlife habitat programs by calling 515-281-5918, or by stopping in at your county’s USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Office and ask about the program.

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